

1. Abstract of the Program

Throughout the United States, the incidence of elder abuse is increasing at an alarming rate each year. It is unknown how many elders who are at risk for abuse and neglect die under suspicious circumstances each year. In response to this growing concern, the County of San Diego Elder Death Review Team (EDRT) was formed in March 2003. The EDRT is a collaborative that was formed by the County's District Attorney, Sheriff, Medical Examiner and the Director of Aging and Independence Services (AIS), a division of the County Health and Human Services Agency. The EDRT reviews deaths associated with suspected elder abuse and/or neglect, identifies risk factors for such deaths, maintains statistical data concerning these deaths, and facilitates communication among agencies involved with elder deaths in order to improve system gaps in service delivery. As its goal, the EDRT seeks to decrease the number of elder deaths that are a result of abuse, neglect or self-neglect, and to identify the role of elder abuse and/or neglect as contributory factors in such deaths. Since its inception, the EDRT has been acting on the front-line in addressing issues of elder abuse and the prevention of elder deaths in San Diego County.

2. The Problem/Need for the Program

The United States Census Bureau estimates that there are more than 36 billion adults age 65 and older living in the United States. Of that, an estimated 3.8 million older adults live in California, and 328,534 older adults reside in San Diego County. As the population of older adults continues to grow, so does the problem of elder abuse and neglect. In fact, elder abuse is one of the fastest growing crimes in the United States. Over 2 million older Americans are the victims of abuse or neglect every year. The problem is compounded by the concern that elder abuse is grossly underreported. It is estimated that for each case of elder abuse that is reported, as many as 14 other cases are not reported. Cases of elder abuse resulting in death are also under recognized and underreported.

In February 2001, State legislation authorized all counties in California to establish elder death review teams. The County of San Diego assembled a team that consists of medical personnel with expertise in elder abuse and neglect; a medical examiner; District and City Attorneys; County Counsel; County staff including Adult Protective Services, In-Home Supportive Services, Public Administrator, Public Guardian, and the Long-Term Care Ombudsman; law enforcement personnel; and Community Care Licensing to meet every six to eight weeks to review elder deaths that may have resulted from neglect or abuse.

The County of San Diego Elder Death Review Team ensures that suspicious deaths involving victims who are 65 years of age or older are evaluated through an intensive interagency review process. In the course of the review, the involvement that each agency had with the perpetrator or the victim is examined. This process results in the development of recommendations for abuse prevention and intervention policies and protocols. This team review and examination process also assists with developing legislative initiatives designed to reduce the incidence of elder abuse and neglect.

3. Description of the Program

The Elder Death Review Team was established in March 2003 through a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) between the County of San Diego District Attorney; the Medical Examiner; the County Sheriff; and the County Health and Human Services Agency's Aging and Independence Services division. The EDRT is a multi-disciplinary team whose task is to review suspicious elder deaths that occur in San Diego County in accordance with a pre-determined set of protocols and procedures. Information gathered by the EDRT and any recommendations made by the team are used to develop education, prevention, and if necessary, prosecution strategies that will lead to improved coordination of services for families and elders in San Diego County.

It is the mission of the EDRT to review deaths that may have resulted from elder abuse and/or neglect, identify risk factors for such deaths, maintain statistical data concerning these deaths and facilitate communication among agencies involved in the identification, investigation or prosecution of elder deaths. The EDRT identifies and bridges system gaps to improve the delivery of services to victims and perpetrators throughout San Diego County. The primary goal of the EDRT is to decrease the number of deaths in the county that are attributed to elder abuse, neglect or self-neglect, and to identify the role of elder abuse and/or neglect as contributing factors in such deaths. The objectives of the EDRT are to promote changes in policies and procedures within member agencies that will facilitate communication and cooperation among all governmental and private agencies, and close service gaps that currently exist; to improve the community response to those at risk; to evaluate services provided to victims and perpetrators prior to the death; and to identify barriers to, and gaps in, services among service providers. Through team collaboration, the EDRT identifies the circumstances surrounding suspicious elder deaths, provides information to public and private agencies that will increase their ability to identify and intervene with persons at risk, and increases public awareness about issues related to elder, family or caregiver violence. The overarching objective of the EDRT is to have a positive impact on the safety and health of San Diego County residents.

The EDRT held its first meeting in May 2003. The team is led by the Senior Deputy District Attorney for Elder Abuse in the District Attorney's office, and membership has grown considerably since the EDRT's inception. The team's coordinator, a Program Specialist with Aging and Independence Services, assists the Chair with day-to-day activities associated with the team. Twenty-three members, representing a wide array of agencies involved in the identification, investigation or prosecution of elder abuse and neglect in San Diego County, meet a minimum of every six to eight weeks to review the suspicious death of an elder adult aged 65 or older that is believed to have been a result of abuse and/or neglect. One suspicious death is reviewed at each meeting. The EDRT Coordinator selects the case to be reviewed based on referrals from team members and member agencies. The coordinator collects information from all member agencies that had contact with the victim or the perpetrator, and invites other agencies outside of the team membership to attend meetings as appropriate. Each EDRT member and invited participants must sign an EDRT Confidentiality Statement at the first meeting that he or she attends. All written and oral information that is shared during the case review is

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confidential and cannot be disclosed outside of the team. All signed confidentiality statements are maintained by the EDRT Coordinator.

At each EDRT meeting, the case review process begins with a synopsis of the case followed by the sharing of information from each attendee that had contact with either the victim or perpetrator at any point in time. It is through this review that a story of the elder's life and death emerges. With input from the entire team, the EDRT Coordinator completes a Case Review Investigative Report at the conclusion of the case review. The Investigative Report includes an investigative summary; information regarding the relationship between the victim and perpetrator; an assessment of risk factors associated with the perpetrator and the victim; and a determination as to whether the victim's death was intervenable at the individual, family, agency, or public policy level, was not intervenable; or is undetermined. Recommendations are also discussed and documented in the Investigative Report. Cases may be held over for continued discussion when necessary. The EDRT Coordinator maintains completed Investigative Reports.

Between May 2003 and November 2005, the EDRT has reviewed a total of 17 suspicious elder deaths. In the course of each case review, the involvement of each agency was examined. This has resulted in the development of recommendations for abuse prevention and intervention policies and protocols. Intensive case reviews and examination will assist in developing legislative initiatives designed to reduce the incidence of elder abuse and neglect in the future. The EDRT is currently in the process of compiling the demographic data and identified risk factors for publication in its first EDRT Report, and team members have presented the team's findings at several conferences.

4. Use of Technology

The EDRT Coordinator maintains a roster of current members' contact information electronically in a Microsoft Word file and updates the information as membership changes. Additionally, the EDRT Coordinator maintains an EDRT member contact distribution list in Microsoft Outlook which aids in the communication regarding upcoming meetings. Approximately one month prior to the meeting date, the EDRT Coordinator notifies all team members via email about the meeting date, time and location and also provides the name, address and other identifiable information about the victim and perpetrator that will be discussed during the next meeting. Each member agency is advised to search their databases for information regarding contacts with either the victim or the perpetrator. Each agency maintains its own database, and a number of software programs are utilized. For example, Adult Protective Services (APS) and In-Home Supportive Services (IHSS) utilize a web-based program entitled the *AIS Application Suite*. The Ombudsman Program searches their *Ombudsmanager* system for information. Each agency that has had contact with either the victim or the perpetrator emails a summary to the EDRT Coordinator prior to the upcoming meeting. During the EDRT meetings, summaries are often presented utilizing PowerPoint or videos. News articles related to elder abuse are downloaded routinely by the EDRT Coordinator from various listserves and Internet resources and are shared with team members at each meeting. The upcoming County of San Diego EDRT Report will be available in print format as well as on Compact Disc (CD), and the

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team has produced a PowerPoint presentation outlining its history, findings, accomplishments and recommendations, which has been presented at several conferences and venues over the past six months.

5. The Cost of the Program

There have been no capital costs incurred to date by the County of San Diego EDRT, as the meeting space and equipment have been donated by Aging and Independence Services. The annual operating costs are approximated below:

| EDRT Operating Costs | |
|--|---------------------|
| Expenses | Annual Costs |
| Salaries (Chair and Coordinator) | \$10,440 |
| Travel | \$58 |
| Supplies (paper, toner) | \$220 |
| Member Agency Representatives' Time and Travel | In-kind resource |
| Total | \$10,718 |

The estimated salary expenses are based on the salary of the team's Chair and Coordinator multiplied by the approximate number of hours each year that are dedicated to the operation and maintenance of the EDRT. The travel expenses are based on the mileage reimbursement rate currently provided by the County of San Diego multiplied by the number of miles that the Chair must travel on an annual basis to attend the EDRT meetings. The supply cost estimate includes the expenses associated with photocopying the meeting agendas, summaries and other handouts.

6. The Results/Success of the Program

Although the EDRT has been in existence for a relatively short time, it has already accomplished many of its goals including greater team building among EDRT participants, enhanced collaboration among EDRT members and agencies, and an increased awareness and sensitivity to elder abuse issues in San Diego County. As a result of the collaboration established in the EDRT, the County's Adult Protective Services (APS) and the Medical Examiner's (ME) Office have partnered to create the Medical Examiner Review Team or MERT. Each morning, the ME staff notifies APS of all deaths of persons over the age of 65 that have been reported to their office. APS then searches their database and reports any relevant APS history to the ME Investigator. With a better understanding of the decedent's history of abuse or neglect, the ME may conduct an autopsy or involve local law enforcement. Suspicious elder deaths are identified through this ground breaking project. Also as a result of the relationships that have been forged in the EDRT, APS has joined forces with the District Attorney, local law enforcement and community partners to develop regional Elder Abuse Councils throughout San Diego County. The Elder Abuse Councils educate the community about the increasing incidence of elder abuse and neglect, seek solutions to this growing problem, establish abuse prevention strategies in each region, and bridge system gaps that are responsible for failed interventions and prosecutions. As a result of the cohesiveness of professionals involved in the identification, investigation or

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prosecution of elder abuse in San Diego County, many of whom are EDRT members, the Archstone Foundation has recently awarded the Family Justice Center a \$400,000, two-year grant to create a collaborative delivery system model that will address elder physical abuse, neglect and financial exploitation. This pilot program is a collaborative effort that involves the DA, APS, the San Diego Police Department, the Public Guardian and the Family Justice Center. These agencies will co-locate to provide comprehensive social, medical, and victim services to abused elders in the central region of San Diego County. Through the EDRT, elder abuse recognition and identification have been enhanced, and the community and elder abuse professionals have been energized to collaborate to reduce the incidence of elder abuse and neglect in San Diego County.

In addition, through case reviews, the EDRT has learned more about the victims and perpetrators of elder abuse and neglect, and has educated the public about the risk factors associated with abuse and neglect. For example, according to the data extrapolated from the cases that the EDRT has reviewed thus far, the majority (77%) of victims have been female. This is consistent with current research in the field of elder abuse, which indicates that victims of elder abuse are predominantly women. Of the perpetrators who were alleged to have been involved in the suspicious deaths of these victims, 64% were female and 36% were male. Considering that most of the deaths that have been reviewed to date involved neglect, this finding is also consistent with current findings in the field. The EDRT's finding that 71% of perpetrators were family members of the victims is also consistent with national statistics regarding elder abuse. Upon examination of the specific familial relationships between perpetrators and victims in the cases that have been reviewed by the EDRT thus far, adult children comprised the largest family group of suspects (60%) followed by spouses (20%). This, too, is consistent with published risk factors. Of the cases that have been reviewed by the EDRT, all of the perpetrators had a personal relationship with the victims, usually a familial relationship. In addition, the majority of victims (64%) experienced significant life stressors, and 43% of victims experienced mental health issues. Furthermore, 50% of victims required at least some level of assistance with activities of daily living (eating, bathing, dressing, grooming, toileting, mobility, transfers). These findings highlight many of the known risk factors associated with elder abuse and neglect. Additionally, the majority of perpetrators (77%) were controlling the victims' finances, and were acting in the capacity of a care provider to the victim (77%). These findings demonstrate that the perpetrators are frequently in positions of trust and great responsibility, and victims are frequently dependent on the perpetrators. This has long been recognized as a risk factor for elder financial abuse, the fastest growing type of elder abuse.

Members of the EDRT are in the process of completing a detailed report on the team's findings and recommendations. This report will be widely distributed to educate others in the county about elder abuse and neglect and to demonstrate the importance of legislative remedies that will support EDRT activities and goals. The team has recognized the need to further educate hospital emergency room personnel and first responders about recognizing and reporting elder neglect and abuse timely, so that the crime scene can be preserved and a criminal investigation initiated immediately. To this end, the EDRT has recently facilitated the establishment of a new pilot project that involves APS, the Medical Examiner (ME) and a large hospital system. Beginning

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November 1, 2005, all medical facilities in one medical system in the county are reporting all patient deaths to the ME's Office in which an APS report was made at some point during the patient's hospitalization. The ME's Office then contacts APS directly for more information that they use to determine their course of action, which may include an autopsy. This pilot project is expected to identify suspicious deaths that would otherwise have gone unrecognized. The expectation is that better identification of suspicious elder deaths will result in increased prosecution of perpetrators and an overall reduction in elder abuse in San Diego County.

7. Worthiness of an Award

The County of San Diego EDRT is an innovative and successful team that has been acting on the front-line in addressing issues of elder abuse and the prevention of elder deaths in San Diego County. Team members share the common goal of decreasing the number of elder deaths that are a result of abuse and neglect. The EDRT has contributed findings that support current research and statistics in the field of elder abuse and can be used to facilitate effective policy making to reduce the incidence of elder abuse and neglect on a national level. The problem of elder abuse is a growing problem in this country and is expected to increase as the baby boomers age. Elder abuse poses a significant fiscal and social burden on society and requires intervention by numerous private and intergovernmental agencies. The County of San Diego EDRT has promoted cooperation and coordination among public and private agencies that are involved in the identification, investigation or prosecution of elder abuse or elder deaths. Through collaboration, cooperation and improvement in service delivery, the EDRT has produced numerous measurable outcomes that will result in the improvement in the health and well-being of the aged and their families.